

## Article

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## Linking sport team sponsorship to perceived switching cost and switching intentions

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## Linking sport team sponsorship to perceived switching cost and switching intentions

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### ABSTRACT

**Research question/purpose:** Although literature has focused on the impact of sponsorship on the customers' purchase intentions, the impact of sport team sponsorship on switching intentions on service providers remains a largely overlooked research topic. The study addresses this gap by examining the effects of sport team sponsorship on the switching intentions of service customers, who at the same time are sport fans.

**Research methods:** The study draws on a sponsorship agreement between a mobile telecommunication company (sponsor) and a European professional football team (sponsored team). Through a survey, 261 responses were collected and subsequently analysed using structural equation modelling techniques.

**Results and findings:** The results suggest that enhancing the relationship of fans with the team and its sponsor – as well as increasing their level of involvement with the sport – can contribute to increasing the perceived switching cost of the fans regarding mobile telecommunications services. Similarly, strengthening the fans' attitudes towards the sponsor can reduce their likelihood of switching to another telecommunications provider.

**Implications:** As the first study to examine the effects of sport team sponsorship on the switching intentions of service customers who at the same time are sport fans, this paper adds to academic understanding of the impacts of sport (football) involvement, team-brand attitude, sponsor-brand attitude, and sponsorship fit on switching intentions and on perceived switching cost of the sponsor's customers. In doing so, the study also investigates how team identification and sponsor affiliation moderate the influence of the aforementioned attributes.

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Consumer switching intentions; sport team sponsorship; telecommunications industry; professional football; team-brand attitudes

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**Paper type** – Research paper

Sport represents a positive way to emotionally connect commercial brands with people (Chanavat, Martinent, & Ferrand, 2010), and marketing techniques such as sport sponsorship have become very popular on worldwide basis (IEG, 2015). Sport sponsorship, being an increasingly dynamic, time-consuming, resourceful and complex activity (Demir & Söderman, 2015), is particularly compelling to both practitioners and academics because of its distinctive characteristics in terms of consumer behaviour. That is, unlike ordinary consumers, sport fans are more passionate and experience strong emotional attachments to their teams (Vallerand et al., 2008), while their purchase decisions are rarely determined by financial and rational criteria (Richelieu, 2004). Current literature supports the argument that variables such as fan identification and sport involvement play important roles in determining the overall effectiveness of sport sponsorship and directly affect the intentions to purchase a sponsor's product (Capella, 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Ko et al., 2008; Lascu et al., 1995; Madrigal, 2000; Meenaghan, 2001b; Pope & Voges, 2000). Furthermore, the positive association between the sponsor and the sponsored party, expressed in terms of sponsor-brand attitude (Lee, Sandler, & Shani, 1997; Speed & Thompson, 2000) and sponsorship fit (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000), has been identified as a key means by which sponsors attempt to impact consumer purchasing behaviour.

However, while the extant literature has focused on the impact of sponsorship on the customers' purchase intentions, its impact on switching intentions remains a largely overlooked research topic. Particularly for service providers, consumer service-switching, i.e., the consumers' migration between service providers or firms (Bansal & Taylor, 1999) has become a primary concern due to its negative impact on company market share and profitability (Keaveney, 1995; Zhang, Cheung, & Lee, 2012). Indeed, previous research has shown that retaining customers is important for a firm's long-term economic viability, as it contributes to

decreased marketing costs, increased sales, and eventually greater profitability (Keaveney & Parthasarathy, 2001; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2003). Losing a customer not only incurs the cost of acquiring new customers, but also giving up high margins of customers who, over time, become loyal, less price-sensitive, and less costly to retain (Anton, Camarero, & Carrero, 2007). Especially for service firms operating on a subscription basis – as, for instance, telecommunications companies – customer switching behaviour can be particularly harmful, and companies must pursue effective strategies to influence the behaviour of their customers. More specifically, Gerpott, Rams and Schindler (2001) point out that in the telecommunication services, as opposed to other industry sectors, once customers have been acquired and connected to the telecommunications network of a particular operator, their long-term links with the focal operator are of greater importance to the success of the company. Moreover, the customers' retention becomes an even more important task for mobile telephony companies when the market in which they operate is reaching the mature stage. This is because in mature markets the number of new subscribers starts to decelerate and stabilize and thus acquiring new customers becomes increasingly difficult and costly. One such a country is Greece, for example, where companies have started to devise and implement strategies based on customer loyalty so that they retain their existing profitable clientele (Santouridis & Trivellas, 2010).

Given the above context, the present study's main goal is to extend previous work at the intersection of sport sponsorship and customer behaviour. In particular, this study addresses an identified gap in the current literature by examining the effects of sport team sponsorship on the switching intentions of service customers, who at the same time are sport fans. In so doing, the study seeks to answer the following research questions. What is the impact of attributes such as sport (football) involvement, team-brand attitude, sponsor-brand attitude, and sponsorship fit on the perceived switching cost of the sponsor's customers? What is the impact of the

aforementioned attributes on the switching intentions of the sponsor's customers? How do team identification and sponsor affiliation moderate the influence of these attributes?

### **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

#### **Service switching**

Consumer service switching has been examined in many service settings, including fitness clubs (Alexandris, Dimitriadis, & Kasiara, 2001), hairstyling (Bansal, Taylor, & James, 2005), banking (Gerrard & Cunningham, 2004; Moutinho & Smith, 2000), insurance (Anton et al., 2007; Lin, 2010), energy supply (Wieringa & Verhoef, 2007), online gaming (Hou et al., 2011; Keaveney & Parthasarathy, 2001) and blogging (Zhang, Cheung, & Lee, 2012). Switching is particularly important for subscription-based utilities such as mobile telecommunications, where customers are required to pay all or part of their charges on a fixed-fee continuous basis (Keaveney & Parthasarathy, 2001). Therefore, while the fixed costs of a telecommunication provider are spread over a connected customer base, departing customers have a negative impact on future revenue streams, but do not correspondingly reduce fixed costs; that is, switching customers may negatively impact economies of scale (Keaveney & Parthasarathy, 2001). Furthermore, the costs are significantly higher for new customer acquisition than for customer retention (Kotler et al., 2013; Zeithaml et al., 1996; Siber, 1997; Hughes, 2008). Indeed, research has shown that the mobile telecommunications industry suffers from the voluntary churn of losing customers to a competitor (Svendsen & Prebensen, 2013). Because the costs of acquiring new subscribers significantly outweigh the costs of maintaining an existing customer base, consumer switching has become an extremely important concern throughout the mobile telecommunications industry.

Since Keaveney's (1995) first attempt at categorising the reasons why customers switch service providers, several studies have examined the factors that cause consumers to stay with their existing providers or switch to competitors. Beyond service quality and customer

satisfaction (Alexandris et al., 2001; Keaveney, 1995, 2001; Moutinho & Smith, 2000; Zeithaml et al., 1996), price stands out as the overwhelming key reason for switching (Gerrard & Cunningham, 2004; Roos et al., 2004). Switching costs, such as terminating contracts prematurely, are also important determinants of switching (Burnham et al., 2003; Jones, Mothersbaugh & Beatty, 2000; Keaveney, 1995; Lee & Murphy, 2005; Sharma & Patterson, 2000). Other factors found to possibly influence switching include alternative attractiveness (Anton et al., 2007; Bansal et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2000), attitudes toward switching (Bansal & Taylor, 1999), social influences such as reference group influence (Childers & Rao, 1992), and the propensity for seeking variety (e.g., Bansal & Taylor, 1999; Givon, 1984).

In the increasingly commercialised sport environment, companies outside sport aim to exploit sport fans' loyalty and support to their teams by presenting themselves as (financial) allies of the team. This position echoes the widely accepted idea that consumers' affiliation with a sponsored entity heavily influences consumers' responses to the sponsor's products (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Meenaghan, 2001b). Therefore, the factors presented to date in the customer switching literature need to be re-examined in the context of sport consumer behaviour, given the unique relationship between fans and their favourite sport teams (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick, & Funk, 2009).

### **Sport sponsorship**

Sport sponsorship, defined as "an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity" (Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36), involves sponsoring sport associations, leagues, teams, athletes, facilities, events, and competitions (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). The focus of this paper is on sport team sponsorship. Previously, local businesses and companies have supported their favourite sport teams for patronising reasons (Cornwell, 1995). Over the years, patronage has become

commercial sponsorship, with both parties benefiting from such a partnership. Sport teams benefit from sponsorship activities in several ways, including financial and in-kind resources (Kim, Ko, & James, 2011), while the sponsor obtains the tangible and intangible benefits of being associated with the sport team (Chen & Zhang, 2011). Firms, of any type and size, activate sport sponsorship programs in order to meet various objectives and reap diverse benefits. These include *inter alia*, high media exposure and awareness, increased sales and/or market share, image enhancement, brand recognition, and community involvement, sampling opportunities and brand loyalty as well as corporate social responsibility (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2004; Bason & Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Chadwick & Thwaites, 2004; Cousens, Babiak, & Bradish, 2006). More specifically, the high media exposure of sport-related events – as well as the access to such a large and diverse audience – offers sponsors considerable incentive to become partners of sport teams in order to expand their brands in foreign markets, as is the case with the relationships between Manchester United and Vodafone, as well as Chelsea and Samsung (Ginesta, 2013).

However, while companies seek tangible benefits from their sponsorship programs just as they do with their purely commercial and advertising programs, sport sponsorship differs in that consumers perceive corporate messages delivered via an association with sport as less obtrusive and direct (Meenaghan, 2001b). This is because fans are emotionally involved when attending sport events (Biscaia et al., 2012; Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011) and sponsor's investment in professional sport teams generates a goodwill effect among fans, which, in turn, influences their attitudes and behaviors toward the sponsor (Meenaghan, 2001a). In essence, sport sponsorship has become a powerful marketing tool for companies, starting to exert its influence once a consumer becomes aware of the sponsor and subsequently leading to a favourable attitude toward



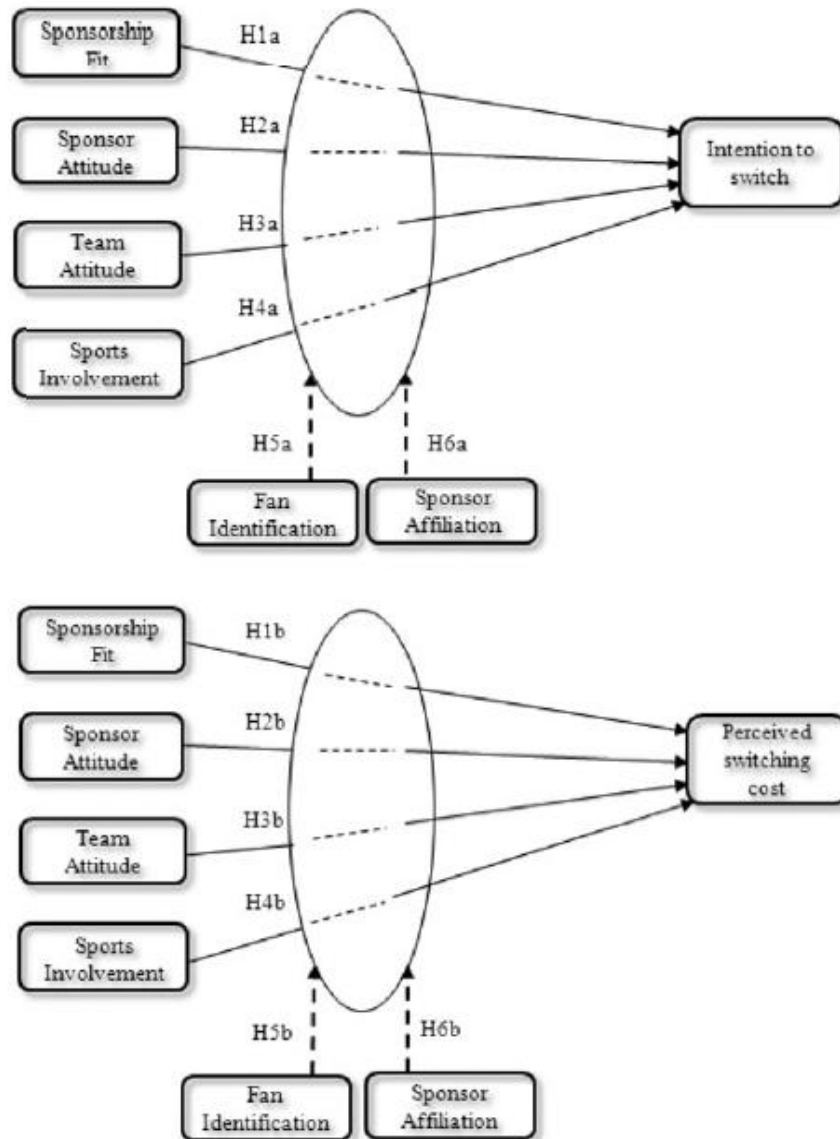
the sponsor and a higher purchase intention toward the sponsor's products (Schlesinger & Gungerich, 2011).

Consumer purchase intention is the most useful indicator of sponsorship effectiveness given its impact on future sales (Crompton, 2004). According to Meenaghan (2001a), fans pass through a series of stages until finally adopting purchase intentions and behaviours toward the sponsors' products. As a result, several researchers have used purchase intentions as the final indicator to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness of fictitious (Alexandris et al., 2007; Madrigal, 2001) or actual sponsors of professional team sports (Biscaia et al., 2013). The latter study in particular concluded that attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards the team have significant positive effects on the intentions to purchase products of the sponsor of the team, while attitude toward the sponsor is the strongest predictor of the intentions to purchase its products. In the case of service providers such as telecommunication companies, purchasing another product essentially means switching to another service provider. Thus, in contrast to consumer goods markets, switching in service industries entails stopping using a brand totally and allocating purchases entirely to a new brand (Sharp, Wright & Goodhardt, 2002). Service switching has severe implications to a company's viability as it leads to reduced market share, impaired profitability, and increased costs (Keaveney, 1995; Zhang, Cheung, & Lee, 2012). Thus, this study extends previous literature by examining the impact of an actual sport team sponsorship on switching intentions on the service provider.

### **Hypothesis development**

The proposed conceptual model is shown graphically in Figure 1. The model posits that sponsorship fit, attitude towards the sponsor, attitude towards the team, and football involvement influence: a) intentions to switch; and b) perceived switching costs. In turn, these relationships are moderated by two factors, fan identification (with the sponsored team) and sponsor affiliation

(existence of a business relationship between consumers and sponsor). The related hypotheses are developed below. It is important to clarify that with hypotheses 1-4, we explore fans perceived switching cost and intention to switch from their current provider.



**Team-sponsor fit.** Fit is defined as "the degree to which the pairing [of an event and sponsor] is perceived as well matched or a good fit, without any restriction on the basis used to establish fit" (Speed & Thompson, 2000, p. 230). This definition has been expanded in this study to include sport teams besides events. Sponsorship fit can be viewed as the logical connection between a

sponsor and a team (Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2009), and it has been empirically examined as a success factor of sponsorship (e.g., Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Lee & Cho, 2009; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000). When fit is low, consumers experience cognitive inconsistency, which negatively influences their responses (Speed & Thompson, 2000). On the other side, high-fit pairings create a shared set of meanings, reinforcing the partners' brand associations and competitive positions (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006). Research has demonstrated that if customers anticipate high congruence between the sponsor and sponsored entity, sponsorship is more likely to arouse positive responses toward the sponsor and the use of the sponsor's products (Thompson & Speed, 2000). Sponsors that are perceived as congruent with the sponsored organisation have been found to benefit more from their sponsorship engagements in terms of increased brand equity (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006) as well as purchase intentions (Close & Lacey, 2013; Koo, Quarterman, & Flynn, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Therefore, it is expected that:

- **H1a:** The fans' perceived team-sponsor fit (TSF) affects their intention to switch service provider (SwI), and
- **H1b:** The fans' perceived team-sponsor fit (TSF) affects their perceived switching cost regarding the service provider (SwI).

**Sponsor-brand attitude and team-brand attitude.** Attitudes are an individual's overall evaluation of an object, issue, or person (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998), and can be formed through direct experiences with an entity or exposure to knowledge and messages, such as information obtained from the media (Albarracin, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Affective dimensions such as like (dislike) or favourable (unfavourable) tend to be indicative of

attitude (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Attitudes toward an object play a significant role in predicting a person's behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 2001; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Formation of a positive consumer attitude toward a sponsor is one of the first steps in the process of building sponsorship effectiveness, and is therefore the primary goal of sponsorship (Chen & Zhang, 2011; Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). Meenaghan (2001a) operationalised the sponsor attitude construct as a favorable disposition toward the sponsor, while Keller (2003) supports the idea that attitude toward the sponsor represents the consumer's overall evaluation of the sponsor's brand.

Positive consumer attitudes toward a sponsor may result in purchase intentions and actual purchase behaviours (Meenaghan, 2001a; Speed & Thompson, 2000). In the sport context, a fan's attitude toward a sponsor (here, referred to as sponsor-brand attitude) is equivalent to the fan's overall impression of a sponsor (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Previous literature has suggested that the link between a consumer and his/her favourite team plays an important role in sponsorship reactions (Roy & Cornwell, 2004; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010). Fans feel that sponsorship provides a benefit to the team with which they identify, whereas traditional advertising primarily has a sales objective (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Meenaghan, 2001b). Therefore, fans express higher levels of loyalty towards those sponsors that financially support their favourite teams (Levin, Beasley, & Gambley, 2004). On the other hand, empirical studies have shown that fans have less positive attitudes toward firms associated with rival teams (Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschlaeger, 2015). Finally, previous studies in the area of sport sponsorship have suggested that positive attitudes toward a sponsor are positively associated with intentions to consider and purchase a sponsor's product (Biscaia et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2011; Madrigal, 2001; Speed & Thompson, 2000). To this end, the current study hypothesises that:

- **H2a:** Sponsor-brand attitude (SA) affects the intention of fans to switch service provider (SwI), and
- **H2b:** Sponsor-brand attitude (SA) affects the perceived switching cost of fans regarding the service provider (SwI).

Firms engaging in sponsorship activities expect sport consumers to have the same strong feelings regarding the sponsor's brand as they have toward their team (Kim, Ko, & James, 2011; Shaw & McDonald, 2006). In the present study, this is referred to as team-brand attitude.

However, not all sport consumers share the same passion about sport, not to mention a specific sport team. Tapp and Clowes' (2002) study offered some useful empirical insights in this regard. First, the above scholars identified a group of supporters (called *casual supporters*) who have a positive attitude towards a team, although clearly to a lesser extent than more loyal fans. Second, such an attitude is also manifested in different consumer behaviour characteristics, since these supporters see the team as an entertainment option and are more likely to make an active evaluation of alternative options (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Thus, the more positive the fan's attitude towards the club, the more does he feel obligated to reciprocate to the sponsor of the club, which can be expressed as an intention to buy or even an actual purchase of products of club sponsors. Third, such fans usually experience lesser degrees of product (sport) involvement and are considered to be more receptive to different marketing approaches by the team (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Drawing on these findings, the present study hypothesises that:

- **H3a:** Team-brand attitude (TA) affects the intention of fans to switch service provider (SwI), and
- **H3b:** Team-brand attitude (TA) affects the perceived switching cost of fans regarding the service provider (SwI).

**Sport involvement.** Involvement is defined as “a person’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests” (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). Sport involvement represents an individual’s interest in a specific sport activity and has been defined as “an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreation activity or associated product” (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997, p. 246). Since this study draws on a football team, the term “football involvement - FI” is used. Sport fans have been regarded as high-involvement fans due to their perceived high interest in sport and the personal importance of sport in their lives (Sutton et al., 1997; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Several researchers argued that fans’ attachment with their favourite teams can be affected through their involvement with a particular sport, in addition to their support of a particular team (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Lascu et al., 1995). The degree of involvement with a particular product has been considered to be a critical factor in explaining various consumer behaviours, such as the dedicated loyalty of sport fans (Meenaghan, 2001b) in predicting sponsorship outcomes in the sport context (Alexandris, Tsaousi, & James, 2007), in determining the overall effectiveness of sport sponsorship (Lascu et al., 1995; Meenaghan, 2001b), and in influencing purchase intentions (Ko et al., 2008). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

- **H4a:** The fans’ involvement with their sport (FI) affects their intention to switch service provider (SwI), and
- **H4b:** The fans’ involvement with their sport (FI) affects their perceived switching cost regarding service provider (SwI).

**The moderating role of fan identification.** Fan (team) identification refers to the extent of the psychological attachment a person feels towards a sport team (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Compared with other service providers, sport teams can generate exceptionally high levels

of identification among consumers (Underwood et al., 2001). Social identity theory provides a useful framework for understanding sports fans' affiliations with sports teams and the consequences of such affiliations (Madrigal, 2004). The basic premise of social identity theory is that part of a person's definition or self-identity involves his or her affiliation to social groups (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Highly identified sport team fans seek strong association with the team (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), viewing team success as personal success and team failure as personal failure (Richelieu, Pawlowski, & Breuer, 2011). They define themselves as members of the team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998) and show favouritism to other fans/members (Gwinner, 2005). By sponsoring a specific sport team, the sponsor will be perceived as aiding the team in accomplishing its goals (Gwinner, 2005), and is therefore accepted as a member by fans (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Consequently, fans are likely to show their favouritism towards the sponsor (Roy & Cornwell, 2004) and exhibit patronising behaviours in the sponsor's stores, making purchases in these stores (Herrmann, Kacha, & Derbaix, 2016). For instance, Gwinner and Swanson (2003) reported that higher levels of team identification among supporters of American football teams were associated with more favourable attitudes toward the image and products of corporate sponsors of the teams. Sport fans are often intensely loyal to those companies that financially support their favourite teams, such as the renowned brand loyalty shown by U.S. fans of NASCAR stock-car racing (Levin, Beasley, & Gambley, 2004). Empirical evidence supports the positive correlation between higher fan identification and sponsorship awareness, positive attitudes and satisfaction towards team sponsors (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001; 2004; Wann, 2006), positive associations towards the sponsor's brand (Donlan, 2014) as well as higher sponsorship consumption (Capella, 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001; 2004; Pope &

Voges, 2000; Wann, 2006; Wang, Jain, Cheng, & Aung, 2012). Accordingly, the next two hypotheses are as follows:

- **H5a:** The relative importance of fit, sponsor brand attitude, team attitude and football involvement as drivers of intention to switch *decrease* among highly identified fans compared to low identified fans of the sponsee team.
- **H5b:** The relative importance of fit, sponsor brand attitude, team attitude and football involvement as drivers of perceived switching cost *increase* among highly identified fans compared to low identified fans of the sponsee team.

**The moderating role of sponsor affiliation.** Sponsor affiliation – that is, the existence of a business relationship between consumers and sponsor – has been examined as a second moderating factor in the present study’s model. A variety of factors that affect the quality of the relationship between consumers and firms and prevent the former to switch to competitors have been proposed in the literature. Customers’ satisfaction with the affiliated brand, as well as switching barriers such as high switching costs to a competitor, are often referred to as primary reasons for customer detention (Lee, Lee, & Feick, 2001; Kim, Park, & Jeong, 2004). In one of the earliest theoretical frameworks for explaining consumer switching, Keaveney (1995) developed a typology of reasons for switching services and measured the frequency of occurrence of the different reasons. These reasons can be grouped as event-related (e.g., a brief service failure) and condition-related (e.g. inaccessibility of service, change of need). Keaveney’s work was extended to distinguish between different types of services. For instance, literature in mobile phone service industries showed that variables having an effect on customer switching intention include satisfaction with the current provider, switching costs, the attractiveness of alternative providers, habit, and trust (Lee & Murphy, 2005; Lee, Lee, & Feick, 2001; Kim, Park, & Jeong,



2004). That is, the qualitative characteristics of the affiliation between a consumer and a brand can have an impact on the overall consumers' switching behaviour. Sponsorship is expected to influence the strength of this impact. Therefore, the final two hypotheses are the following:

strength

- **H6a:** The relative importance of fit, sponsor brand attitude, team attitude and football involvement as drivers of intention to switch *decrease* among the fans-consumers of the sponsor provider compared to the fans-consumers of the sponsor's competitors.
- **H6b:** The relative importance of fit, sponsor brand attitude, team attitude and football involvement as drivers of perceived switching cost *increase* among the fans- consumers of the sponsor provider compared to the fan-consumers of the sponsor's competitors.

## Method

### Research setting

The research setting of the present study was the Greek market, with a focus on the relationship between Olympiacos football club (hereafter Olympiacos) – arguably the most successful football team in the country (Anagnostopoulos & Senaux, 2011) – and the mobile telecommunications company that sponsors it, Vodafone Greece. Greece is the most mature mobile market in Europe's southeastern region. Mobile telephony services have been available to Greek consumers since 1993, reaching a total of almost 13 million subscriptions during 2014, a market penetration of 114 percent (The World Bank, 2015). As in most developed economies, the mobile market in Greece has an oligopolistic structure. The market is dominated by three mobile network operators: Wind Hellas, Vodafone Greece, and Cosmote. Vodafone Greece is the Greek subsidiary of Vodafone Group, one of the largest telecommunications providers worldwide. It is

the second-largest operator in the Greek market with approximately 4.9 million subscribers and an estimated market share of 32 percent (Maxwell, 2015). Vodafone has been a major sponsor of many sport teams and events in Greece; among others, these include the Greek national football team and the Greek football champions, Olympiacos. In the latter case, the partnership with Olympiacos has been in place for the last 17 years. Olympiacos has achieved a record of 42 domestic titles (including 17 of the last 18 years) and is the most popular football team in Greece (Union of European Football Associations – UEFA, 2012). Therefore, such a well-established affiliation between two successful parties provides an ideal context for the purposes of this study.

### **Data collection**

The study sought to explore first the effects of sponsorship on fans' (as a distinctive target market) perceived switching cost and intentions in the telecommunication industry, and then control for fan identification and sponsor affiliation. With the assistance of one researcher, the objectives of the study were first introduced before respondents were asked a screening question to identify those who were both Olympiacos fans and subscribers of any of the three 'big' telecommunication service providers (i.e. Vodafone, Cosmote, Wind) in the Greek market. It was, therefore, the latter question which provided the sampling frame for this study. After fans replied positively on the screening question, they were reminded of the active sponsorship agreement between the telecommunication provider of Vodafone and their favorite team, with the following text: *"Vodafone has signed a long-lasting agreement with the team of Olympiacos as main sponsor of the football team. Keeping in mind always the above agreement, please answer the following questions"*. The particular reminder deemed necessary to contextualise the respondents to the necessary sponsorship information in order to respond to the questions relating to the evaluation of sponsors' brand attitude. Two slightly different questionnaires were created: one for the fans who were subscribers of the team sponsor, and one for the fans who were

subscribers of the key competitors of the sponsor. This procedure enabled the gathering of comparable data to assess the general switching intentions from the current provider (either sponsor or competitors) to one of competitors in the sector, taking into account the sponsorship context. This procedure provided data for testing the first five study hypotheses and allowed for testing the sixth hypothesis, which sought to explore whether the effects of sponsorship on switching cost and intentions differ between the fans-consumers of the sponsor and of sponsor's competitors. Data were collected on different days and at different times of day (morning, early afternoon, and late afternoon) in different public locations in a major Greek city. On average, the surveys took eight to twelve minutes for respondents to complete onsite.

The final sample for this study consisted of 261 Greek respondents, 65.7 percent of whom were men and 32.4 percent women. Most of the respondents (57.6 percent) in the sample were highly educated with at least a university degree, and 86.4 percent of the respondents were in the 18 to 35 years age range. The particular sampling procedure utilised in this study resulted in a convenience sample of fans which, however, conforms - in terms of its demographic profile - with other studies related to sport fans either in the Greek context (e.g., Theodorakis, Dimmock, Wann, & Barlas, 2010) or internationally (e.g., Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exlex, 2008).

### **Measurement**

The initial survey was pre-tested in a sample of 12 graduate students who were fans of a local team and consumers of either the sponsor or its competitors. Based on respondents' minor comments, the survey was strengthened further in regards to clarity and content validity. The survey consisted of two parts: Part one included the scales measuring the variables of team-sponsor fit, sponsor-brand attitude, team-brand attitude, football involvement, perceived switching cost and intentions to switch, while part two included questions related to socio-demographics and the current profiles of consumers in terms of mobile telecommunications

services.

To measure the constructs of the two models, the authors used existing scales, widely used in the sponsorship literature, which were only slightly modified to fit the needs of the present study. Therefore, all construct measures employed had proven content validity and reliability. Table 1 presents the actual items, the sources of each measure, along with its reliability and validity values. Specifically, in regards to team-sponsor fit, the literature offers different dimensions for operationalising fit based not only on functional but also on image characteristics (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010). For the purpose of this study, we follow Speed and Thompson's (2000) widely cited operationalisation as a general and single construct capturing how fans' perceive the matching between the sponsor and the team in terms of relevance and image pairing. Therefore, **Team-sponsor fit** was measured by the five-item scale used by Speed and Thompson (2000), which captures the symbolic and functional fit between the image of the sponsor and the sponsored team. For this study, representative items included the following: (a) *"The image of Olympiacos and the image of Vodafone Greece are similar"* and (b) *"It makes sense to me that Vodafone Greece sponsors Olympiacos"*. **Sponsor-brand attitude** and **team-brand attitude** were measured with the three-item semantic scale – *dislike/like, unfavourable/favourable, and negative/positive* – following previous similar studies in the literature (i.e., Kim et al., 2011; Lii, Wu, & Ding, 2013; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Weeks, Cornwell, & Drennan, 2008).

**Sport (football) involvement** was measured on a three-item scale adopted from Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009), capturing the element of centrality of sport in fan's life. For this decision we draw on Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, and Jordan (2011) who conceptualise football involvement as a multidimensional construct reflecting attitudinal elements related centrality, hedonic and symbolic value. We decided to follow previous researchers (McGee, Yoon, & Cardenas, 2003)

who have adopted the one-dimensional measure (i.e. centrality) as more convenient and preferred option for empirical testing in the extant literature. Examples of items are: “*Football is an important part of my life*” and “*Most of my friends are in some way connected with football*” (see Table 1). To measure **perceived switching cost**, researchers used the three-item scale adopted from Bansal, Taylor, and James (2005). Representative items included the following: (a) “*Overall, I would spend a lot and lose a lot if I switched from Vodafone*” and (b) “*Considering everything, the costs to stop doing business with Vodafone and start up with a new company would be high*”. Respondents were asked to rate all the above measures by using seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. In order to make the measurement more efficient, the questionnaire also included a few reverse items.

**Table 1.** Constructs, items, evaluation of the measurement model and construct validity.

Latent variable	Items	Factor loadings
Team-sponsor fit ( $\alpha^a = .84$ ; $CR^b = .84$ ; $AVE^c = .53$ )		
	There is a logical connection between the ‘team name’ and the ‘sponsor name’	.69
	The image of the ‘team name’ and the image of the ‘sponsor name’ are similar	.79
	‘Sponsor name’ and the ‘team name’ fit together well	.83
	‘Sponsor name’ and the ‘team name’ stand for similar things	.67
	It makes sense to me that ‘sponsor name’ sponsors this ‘team name’	.62
Sponsor attitude ( $\alpha = .93$ ; $CR = .93$ ; $AVE = .83$ )		
	Dislike/like	.86
	Unfavourable/favourable	.95
	Negative/positive	.92
Team attitude ( $\alpha = .89$ ; $CR = .89$ ; $AVE = .74$ )		
	Dislike/like	.85
	Unfavourable/favourable	.82
	Negative/positive	.91
Sport involvement ( $\alpha = .70$ ; $CR = .71$ ; $AVE = .48$ )		
	Football is an important part of my life	.71
	Most of my friends are in some way connected with football	.50
	To me, there is no other sport like football	.80
Switching costs ( $\alpha = .68$ ; $CR = .72$ ; $AVE = .47$ )		
	On the whole, I would spend a lot of time and money to switch from ‘sponsor name’	Deleted
	Overall, I would spend a lot and lose a lot if I switched from ‘sponsor name’	.72
	Considering everything, the costs to stop doing business with ‘sponsor name’ and start up with a new company would be high	.81
Switching intentions	How likely is to twitch your telecommunication provider with another one within the next 3 months?	

<sup>a</sup>Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ .

<sup>b</sup>Composite reliability (CR).

<sup>c</sup>Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

**Switching intention** was conceptualised as the affirmed likelihood of replacing the current provider with another one (Oliver, 1997). The particular construct was measured with one item: “How likely are you to switch your telecommunications provider to another one within the next three months?” A seven-point scale was used to measure this item, ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely.

Finally, besides the above measures, the survey contained questions to collect basic demographic variables, the currently selected provider for telecommunications services, and fan identification. The variable of fan identification, borrowed from Wann and Branscombe (1993), assessed the degree to which respondents see themselves as fans of a particular team (“*How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of the team?*”). Although fan identification is usually a multi-item construct, for the present study a single-item measure was deemed appropriate to increase clarity for the respondents and facilitate brevity and ease of use for the fans/respondents. Admittedly, single-item measures have been criticised for falling short in psychometric properties. However, Kwon and Trail (2005) offered systematic evidence supporting the superiority of single-item measure in terms of concurrent validity when compared with a multiple item scale of fan identification, and proved that the single measure had good reliability value (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). It is also worth mentioning that the use of a single-item scale for measuring fan identification has been adopted in previous sport consumer behaviour studies (Koenigstorfer, Blank, & Baumgartner, 2013). This single-item scale for fan identification was measured on a seven- point scale ranging from 1 = not at all a fan to 7 = very much a fan.

## **Results**

### **Measurement model**

Before confirmatory factor analysis, the dataset was scrutinised for normality, estimating skewness values for each measure, which were found within the acceptable range  $<+1$ ,  $>-1$ , and

kurtosis values, for which the absolute value of the kurtosis was found to be less than three times the standard error, which is within acceptable levels (Hair et al., 1995). Next, CFA with maximum likelihood estimation was performed to test the measurement model's adequacy along with reliability and validity, using the 17 items as indicators of the underlying five latent variables capturing team-sponsor fit, sponsor-brand attitude, team-brand attitude, football involvement, and perceived switching cost. The measurement model fit was examined using fit indices such as the chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), and root mean square error of approximation, or RMSEA (Hu & Bentler, 1998). It is recommended that the thresholds for an acceptable fit should be .90 or below for CFI and .90 or below for IFI, while a RMSEA value of less than .08 indicates an acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1998; Kline, 1998). The goodness-of-fit statistics for the first model were  $\chi^2=149.482$  (df=94;  $p<.001$ ; CMIN/DF=1.59); RMSEA=.04; CFI=.90; IFI=.90; GFI=.93. These values of the fit indices for the model indicated that the measurement model fits the data satisfactorily (Kline, 1998). Table 1 presents standardised factor loadings for each indicator, which were above 0.5 and statistically significant in CFA, with the exception of one item ("*On the whole, I would spend a lot of time and money to switch from Vodafone*"), which did not load sufficiently on the variable of perceived switching cost. This item was dropped from the model during the earlier stages of the analysis, and the model was re-estimated, producing an improved fit to the data.

Two types of construct validity were examined: convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity refers to the degree to which indicators of a construct converge or share an acceptable percentage of variance (Hair et al., 2006). The construct AVEs ranged from .48 to .83 for the fan-sponsor relationship variables, and were measured at .47 for the variable of switching cost (see Table 1), supporting the convergent validity of all scales (Fornell & Larcker, 1981),

with the exceptions of “football involvement” and “switching cost”, which were threshold cases (.48 and .47, respectively). It was decided to maintain these two cognitive variables in the model based on their estimates of composite reliability (.71 and .72) and internal consistency values (.70 and .68), which were satisfactory. In addition, these two factors explained a large amount of the variance in the factor analysis procedure.

Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which each construct in the tested model is unique and distinctive from the others, and it was tested following the guidelines by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Kline (2005), which indicated that the squared correlation between two constructs should be less than the *AVEs* of each construct, and the correlation between constructs should be lower than .85. As shown in Table 2, evidence of discriminant validity was provided for all constructs, as all *AVEs* exceeded respective squared factor correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and no pair of inter-construct correlation coefficients was found to be above the cutoff point of .85 (Kline, 2005).

Reliability was examined using **Cronbach’s  $\alpha$**  estimates. As shown in Table 2, the respective values ranged from .68 to .93 for all of the variables in the model, meaning that overall, all variables met the recommended threshold value of .6 or higher (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Since all scales in this study were evaluated and deemed as having adequate measurement properties, the testing of the hypotheses was the next step in the analysis. For the next stages of the structural model analysis, mean scores for each of the four fan-sponsor relationship variables and the customer characteristic variables were created as new input variables, producing a more parsimonious model for further analysis.



**Table 2.** Means, standard, and correlations.

Latent variable			Fan-sponsor relationship variables					
	M <sup>a</sup>	SD <sup>b</sup>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Team-sponsor fit (TSF)	4.52	1.35	1					
2. Sponsor attitude (SA)	4.96	1.40	.38**	1				
3. Team attitude (TA)	5.21	1.48	.24**	.34**	1			
4. Sport (football) involvement (FI)	3.81	1.45	.34**	.14*	.13*	1		
5. Switching cost (SwC)	3.00	1.62	.26**	.20**	.25**	.27**	1	
6. Intention to Switch (SwI)	2.11	1.89	-.00	-.17**	-.12*	.06	-.09	1

<sup>a</sup>Mean values for each construct (M).<sup>b</sup>Standard deviation values (SD).<sup>c</sup>Cronbach's  $\alpha$ .<sup>d</sup>Composite reliability (CR).<sup>e</sup>Average Variance Extracted (AVE).\*\*Significant at  $p < .01$ .\*Significant at  $p < .05$ .

### Hypothesis testing through SEM

Following the assessment of the measurement model, the hypothesised relationships were tested through structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 21. Table 3 presents the results for the main effects of the four independent variables on switching cost and intentions to switch. The overall fit measures of the structural model produced a good fit of the model to the data ( $\chi^2=5.679$ ,  $df=2$ ;  $p<.05$ ; CFI=.97; GFI=.99; IFI=.97; RMSEA=0.08), indicating that the proposed model provides an significant proportion (13%) of the variance in switching cost and an adequate portion of the variance (5%) in consumers' intentions to switch provider.

Three of the four hypotheses (H1b, H3b, and H4b) in relation to switching cost were supported, indicating the significant effects of team-sponsor fit ( $\beta=.13$ ;  $p=.05$ ), team-brand attitude ( $\beta=.17$ ;  $p=.006$ ), and football involvement ( $\beta=.19$ ;  $p=.001$ ) on switching cost, whereas the impact of sponsor-brand attitude on switching cost ( $\beta=.06$ ;  $p=.35$ ) was not significant, leading to the rejection of H2b. These results provided support for H1, H3, and H4, but not for H2.

With regard to H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a, the findings were supportive, revealing a significant and positive effect only for sponsor-brand attitude on intentions to switch ( $\beta=.17$ ;  $p=.01$ ), in support of H2a. However, the effects of team-sponsor fit ( $\beta=.05$ ;  $p=.44$ ), team-brand

attitude ( $\beta = -.08$ ;  $p = .21$ ), and football involvement on intentions to switch were not significant, leading to rejection of H1a, H3a, and H4a.

**Table 3.** SEM results for the total sample of fans ( $N = 249$ ).

Links	Coefficient	t Value	Hypothesis support
H1a (TSF→SwI)	.05	.44	No
H1b (TSF→SwC)	.13*	.05	Yes
H2a (SA→SwI)	-.17**	.01	Yes
H2b (SA→SwC)	.06	.35	No
H3a (TA→SwI)	-.08	.21	No
H3b (TA→SwC)	.17**	.006	Yes
H4a (FI→SwI)	.08	.19	No
H4b (FI→SwC)	.19***	.001	Yes
$R^2$ (SwI)	.05		
$R^2$ (SwC)	.13		
$\chi^2 = 5.679$ (df = 2 $p < .05$ ; RMSEA = .08; CFI = .97; GFI = .99; IFI = .97)			

Note: TSF: team-sponsor fit; SA: sponsor attitude; TA: team attitude; FI: sport (Football) involvement; SwC: switching cost; intention to switch (SwI); S: supported; NS: nonsupported; RMEA: root mean square error of approximation; CFI: comparative fit index; GFI: goodness of fit index; IFI: incremental fit index.

### Moderating effects

Metric invariance analysis was employed to explore the moderating effects of sponsorship affiliation and fan identification in determining perceived switching cost and intention to switch. To this end, series of modeling tests were undertaken for metric invariance in order to demonstrate that the particular model and its factor structure operates in the same way across the sub-groups under study. This analysis was followed by multi-group structural equation analyses to explore the moderating effects of sponsorship affiliation and fan identification in the specific paths of the proposed model of switching cost.

As for the effect of sponsorship affiliation on determining switching cost, the total sample was divided into two sub-samples on the basis of subjects' responses to the question of the current telecommunications provider used. This produced two independent sub-samples of respondents – customers of the team sponsor ( $N=125$ ) and customers of the main competitor to the sponsor ( $N=101$ ). To test the moderating effects of fan identification, the mean split was used to divide the sample into two sub-groups, consisting of highly identified ( $N=105$ ) and low

identified fans (N=143) of the sponsored team.

The results for the measurement invariance are presented in Table 4. Based on Byrne (2004), measurement invariance was tested as a prerequisite for assessing whether there is equality of factor loading across the two groups (customers of the sponsor and customers of the competitor), by comparing the full-metric invariance (factor loadings constrained to be equal across the two groups) with the non-restricted model (factor loadings allowed to vary between the subgroups).

For the moderating effect of sponsor affiliation on perceived switching cost, the data for the full-metric invariance model produced an adequate fit ( $\chi^2=4.326$ ,  $df= 2$ ;  $p<.05$ ; CFI=.98; GFI= .99; and RMSEA=.07). For the unrestricted model, the data were  $\chi^2=12.425$ ,  $df= 6$ ;  $p<.05$ ; CFI=0.95; GFI= 0.98; and RMSEA=0.07, respectively. The chi-square difference test was used to compare the full-metric invariance model with the unrestricted model, and this was found to be significant ( $\Delta\chi^2= 8.099$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p=.08$  or  $p>.05$ ), indicating that the two groups of consumers are not different at the model level. The chi-square difference between the unrestricted and the restricted model for the moderating effect of sponsor affiliation on switching intention ( $\Delta\chi^2(4)=8.082$ ;  $p >.05$ ) was not significant, meaning that the two sub-groups are not different at the model level. Similarly, the paths from the independent variables to perceived switching cost ( $\Delta\chi^2(4)=3.969$ ;  $p >.05$ ) and to intention to switch ( $\Delta\chi^2(4)=3.122$ ;  $p >.05$ ) were significantly different between the low identified and highly identified sub-groups. This indicates that the factor structure under study is invariant across the highly identified and low identified groups, providing full support for measurement invariance (Byrne, 2004).

**Table 4.** Measurement invariance based on the two moderating variables.

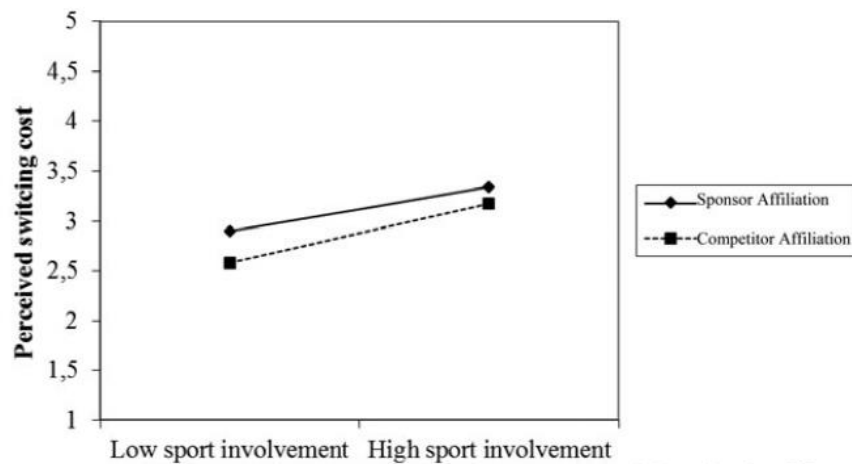
Moderator	Model	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	GFI	$\Delta\chi^2(df)$
H5a: Sponsor affiliation <sup>a</sup> Antecedents→SwC	Unconstrained model	4.326 (2) $p < .05$	.07	.98	.99	8.099 (4) $p = .08 (>.05)$ No significant
	Fully Constrained	12.425 (6) $p < .05$	.07	.95	.98	
H5b: Sponsor affiliation Antecedents→SwI	Unconstrained model	4.326 (2) $p < .05$	.07	.97	.99	8.082 (4) $p = .08 (>.05)$ No significant
	Fully Constrained	12.408(6) $p < .05$	.07	.94	.97	
H6a: Fan identification <sup>b</sup> Antecedents→SwC	Unconstrained model	9.488 (2) $p < .01$	.09	.95	.98	39.69 (4) $p = .41 (>.05)$ No significant
	Fully constrained	13.457 (6) $p < .05$	.07	.95	.97	
H6a: Fan identification Antecedents→SwI	Unconstrained model	9.488 (2) $p < .01$	.09	.95	.98	31.22 (4) $p = .530 (>.05)$ No significant
	Fully constrained	12.610(6) $p < .01$	.08	.95	.98	

<sup>a</sup>Consumer of sponsor provider, consumer of non-sponsor provider/competitor.

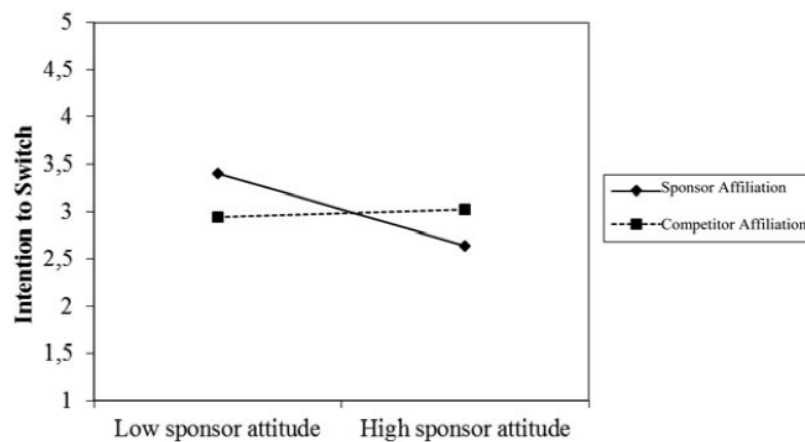
<sup>b</sup>High and low.

The final step of this analysis comprised further testing for exploring specific significant path difference between sub-groups based on sponsor affiliation, by imposing constraints on regression paths one at a time and monitoring differences in the chi-square values for each structural model. These chi-square difference results revealed only two significant path differences between the sponsor's customers and competitors' customers, out of the eight regression paths in the particular model: The first part in regards to the effects of sponsor-brand attitude on the intentions to switch is stronger for current customers of the team sponsor ( $\beta = -.38$ ;  $p < .001$ ) than for customers of the competitor ( $\beta = -.03$ ;  $p > 0.5$ ) ( $\Delta\chi^2_{\text{sponsor attitude} - \text{switching intentions}} = 10.14$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Figure 2 indicates that the relationship between sponsor attitude and fans' intention to switch from the sponsor to other provider is stronger, negative and significant for the fans who are current customers of the team sponsor; this can be partially attributed to the sponsorship. However, for fans who are customers of other providers, there is not much of an effect from sponsor attitude to fans' intention to switch from their provider towards the sponsor. The second path referred to the link from football involvement to switching cost and was also found significantly different across the two groups ( $\Delta\chi^2_{\text{football involvement} - \text{switching cost}} = 10.80$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

In particular, the effects of football involvement on perceived switching cost were slightly stronger for team fans who are current customers of the competitor ( $\beta=.41$ ;  $p<.001$ ) than consumers who currently affiliated with the team sponsor ( $\beta=.10$ ;  $p>.05$ ), as presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 2.** Moderating effects of sport involvement between sport involvement and perceived switching cost.



**Figure 3.** Moderating effects of sponsor attitude between sponsor attitude and intention to switch.

### The mediating effect of switching cost

With respect to exploring the mediating effect of switching cost in the hypothesised relationships between switching intentions as dependent variable and independent variables of fans' perceived team-sponsor fit, sponsor-brand attitude, team-brand attitude and fans' football involvement,

SEM was employed with the bootstrapping method using 2.000 resamples, in AMOS. The data set was checked for univariate (all  $\beta_2 < 7$ ) and multivariate normality (Mardia's normalised estimate = 3 which is less than 5) suggesting normality in the sample based on criteria set by Kline (2005) and Bentler (2005). This analysis assesses the significance of the indirect and the total effects as well as the proportion of variances explained for switching intentions taking into account the indirect effects. The results from this analysis are presented in Table 6. Based on sponsorship affiliation and fan identification, the indirect effects on fans' switching intentions are not significant for both the total and the sub-samples. This indicates that switching cost is not a full or partial mediator in the relationship between the four independent variables and fans' switching intention.

## **Discussion**

### **Theoretical implications**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of sport team sponsorship on consumers' switching intentions. From a theoretical standpoint, the original contribution of the present study is fivefold. First, it contributes to the extant literature by investigating high-level sponsorship effects such as attitudes and/or behavioural changes (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Thjomoe et al., 2002). Empirical studies to date have examined the influence of the above-mentioned factors only as far as purchase intentions are concerned. This study extends previous work in the area of sport sponsorship and consumer behaviour by providing some important insights into the relationship between the team-sponsor association (including team-sponsor fit, sponsor-brand attitude, team-brand attitude, and football involvement) and the switching behaviour (perceived switching cost and intention to switch) of fans of the sponsored team.

**Table 5.** Results from the mediation analysis.

Links	Indirect effects	Total effects	Direct
Total sample			No mediation $R^2 = .04$
TSF→SwC→SwI	-.01	-.01	
SA→SwC→SwI	-.00	-.20*	
TA→SwC→SwI	-.01	-.09	
SI→SwC→SwI	-.01	.14	
<i>Sponsor affiliation (N = 125)</i>			No mediation $R^2 = .16$
TSF→SwC→SwI	.00	.00	
SA→SwC→SwI	.00	-.38**	
TA→SwC→SwI	.00	-.06	
SI→SwC→SwI	.00	.06	
<i>Nonsponsor affiliation (N = 101)</i>			No mediation $R^2 = .03$
TSF→SwC→SwI	-.00	-.00	
SA→SwC→SwI	.00	.04	
TA→SwC→SwI	-.01	-.06	
SI→SwC→SwI	-.04	.14	
<i>High fan identification (N = 105)</i>			No mediation $R^2 = .11$
TSF→SwC→SwI	-.01	-.01	
SA→SwC→SwI	-.00	-.17	
TA→SwC→SwI	-.01	-.20	
SI→SwC→SwI	-.00	.14	
<i>Low fan identification (N = 143)</i>			No mediation $R^2 = .02$
TSF→SwC→SwI	-.00	-.00	
SA→SwC→SwI	-.00	-.10	
TA→SwC→SwI	-.00	-.03	
SI→SwC→SwI	-.01	.04	

Second, football involvement, team-brand attitude, and team-sponsor fit all play significant roles in forming the perceptions of switching cost of fans of the sponsored team. This finding provides support for the inclusion of these variables in the proposed model and indicates their importance in terms of sponsorship effectiveness. Among the three variables, football involvement and team-brand attitude had stronger effects on perceived switching cost, compared to team-sponsor fit. In that sense, the results extend previous findings that highly involved consumers have a direct and positive influence on sponsor awareness (Ko et al., 2008; Lascu et al., 1995), sponsor image, and consumers' purchase intentions (Ko et al., 2008), by providing empirical evidence that high involvement leads to increased perceived switching costs and therefore makes switching to competitors more unlikely. In addition, the results further support prior studies contending that fit valence contributes to the improvement of attitudes toward the sponsor brand (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Lee & Cho, 2009; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006;

Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Third, despite the fact that sponsor brand attitude was the only dimension of the four examined to have a significant effect on fans' switching intentions, this study extends previous findings that sponsor-brand attitude not only affects purchase intentions (Biscaia et al., 2013), but also has significant implications for the switching intentions of customers.

Fourth, with regard to the roles of sponsor affiliation and fan identification in moderating the relationships between the variables of team-sponsor association and switching intentions, this study offered a more in-depth understanding of the differences across sub-groups, in particular consumers of the sponsor vis-à-vis consumers of the competitor as well as highly identified versus low identified fans. Overall, sponsor affiliation was found to have only a partially moderating role in these relationships. In particular, the results (see Tables 4 and 5) indicate that the links from team-sponsor fit (.18) to perceived switching cost and from team-brand attitude (.23) to perceived switching cost – as well as from sponsor-brand attitude (-.38) to switching intention – were significantly higher for fans who were current customers of the team's sponsor than those who were customers of a sponsor's competitor. These findings imply that fans who are current customers of the sponsor are more impacted from the team-sponsor relationship and its management in terms of team-sponsor fit and attitudes towards the sponsor and the team. Furthermore, the influence of football involvement on perceived switching cost was stronger for the customers of the competitor than customers of the sponsor.



**Table 6.** Moderating effect of sponsor affiliation and fan identification on the relationships between independent variables, switching cost and intention to switch.

Links	Sponsor affiliation		Fan Identification	
	Consumers of sponsor	Consumers of non-sponsor	Low fan identification	High fan identification
H1a (TSF→SwI)	.05	.09	.04	.06
H1b (TSF→SwC)	<b>.18*</b>	.06	<b>.20*</b>	.14
H2a (SA→SwI)	<b>-.38***</b>	-.03	-.11	-.20
H2b (SA→SwC)	.08	-.08	-.01	.05
H3a (TA→SwI)	-.07	-.01	-.04	-.19
H3b (TA→SwC)	<b>.23**</b>	.13	.10	.10
H4a (FI→SwI)	.05	.08	.03	-.04
<b>H4b (FI→SwC)</b>	.10	<b>.41***</b>	.02	.11
R <sup>2</sup> (SwI)	<b>.16</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>.13</b>
R <sup>2</sup> (SwC)	<b>.17</b>	<b>.19</b>	<b>.08</b>	<b>.05</b>

Fifth, extending the works of Olson and Thjomoe (2009) and Trendel and Warlop (2005), who contend that low-fit sponsors may benefit more from stronger identification than high-fit sponsors, this study found that team-sponsor fit has a stronger effect on perceived switching costs for low identified fans than for highly identified fans. However, the remaining links were found to be moderated insignificantly by the variable of fan identification. This means that highly identified fans are not impacted by factors such as team-sponsor fit, attitudes toward the sponsor, and football involvement with regard to their switching intentions. These findings are consistent with previous recommendations (Meenaghan, 2001; Tsotsou & Alexandris, 2009) that segmentation of sport fans (in terms of levels of identification and involvement) has become a necessary topic for investigation in sponsorship studies and also has important managerial implications, as explained below.

### Managerial contributions

An important implication for managers is that several factors of the present model are controllable from a service firm's point of view; that is, managers might take action to influence the variables presented in this study with a view to prevent customer switching – either by increasing perceived switching costs, by directly impacting switching intentions, or both. Among the variables tested, football involvement, team-brand attitude, and team-sponsor fit play the

most significant roles in forming the perceived switching costs of the fans of the sponsored team, while of the four examined, sponsor-brand attitude was the only dimension to have a significant effect on fans' switching intentions. These results indicate that improving the relationship of the fans with the team, the congruence between sponsor and team, as well as the level of involvement to the sport concerned, can all contribute to increase the perceived switching costs for mobile telecommunications services. Similarly, by strengthening the fans' brand attitudes towards the sponsor, firms can reduce the likelihood of fans switching to another telecommunications provider.

Because sponsor-brand attitude showed a significant effect on the intentions to switch services, sponsors should increase their efforts to attract fans to sponsored events (Maxwell & Lough, 2009), and create a link between them and the fans by offering exclusive products for supporters, discounted tickets for future games, or opportunities to participate in the team's social events and activities. Such actions can raise the emotions and satisfaction of fans (spectators) with significant implications on their purchasing behavior (Biscaia et al., 2012). However, since such tactics require close cooperation with team management, professionals of both parties may want to formalise working relationships during the sponsorship contract negotiations.

While team-sponsor fit had a lesser impact on perceived switching costs compared to the other variables, firms should still endeavour to create a perception of fit, particularly when the connection between sponsor and the team is not obvious. For instance, as a means to achieve the team's goals, a communications service provider such as Vodafone could initiate a campaign featuring team players and coaching staff communicating with each other and/or with fans.

Finally, this study further suggests that sponsorship is an effective marketing communications tool for companies, but that all consumers will not feel its influence equally. For instance, team-sponsor fit was found to have a stronger effect on perceived switching costs for

low identified fans than for highly identified fans. Thus, from a management perspective, the present study's results imply that greater gains in sponsorship effectiveness can be made by segmenting the sport spectator market according to level of team identification and/or football involvement, and then applying tailored marketing strategies to the different segments.

These findings further indicate that both sponsorship and sport managers need to have a good understanding of the attitudes held by their audiences in order to maximise the value of the sponsorship to their respective organisations. For sponsors, this means that it is not enough to consider exposure alone when selecting and evaluating sponsorships. Instead, utilising consumer market research to identify opportunities to demonstrate fit becomes a key part of sponsorship management. For sport managers, this means that understanding team-brand attitudes held not only by its core fans but also by the wider population is critical in optimising sponsor selection.

Finally, the role of switching cost in mediating the relationship between switching intentions and the four independent variables (i.e., fans' perceived team-sponsor fit, sponsor-brand attitude, team-brand attitude and fans' football involvement) was also explored separately by bootstrapping the sampling distribution. Switching cost was found to neither fully nor partially mediate the particular set of relationships across the total sample, and the two set of sub-samples based on sponsor affiliation and fan identification. This means that the presence of switching cost did not play any significant role in mediating these relationships. Given that the literature is scarce in the conceptualisation of the perceived switching cost as a mediator for these relationships, the present finding is puzzling but raises interesting questions for further research in regards to the underlying mechanisms by which attitudes related to sponsorship affect switching intentions.

### **Conclusions, limitations, and further research**

This study has provided a stepping stone for future research at the intersection of sport sponsorship and consumer switching intentions. Despite the significant contributions of this study, several opportunities exist for further scholarly activity to enhance our understanding of sponsorship effectiveness. First, the context of sponsorship was limited to one professional football team and one of its sponsors. Therefore, the findings may have been influenced by the specific characteristics of the sponsorship context and service setting, and lack generalisability. A replication study in other sporting contexts and more specific target markets (i.e., switchers, continuers, or frequent and infrequent switchers) is therefore recommended for improving the generalisability of the present findings in other service-based settings.

Second, the purpose of this study was to explore the typical drivers from the extant literature (i.e., fit, team attitude, sponsor attitude and football involvement) with established expected relationship with sponsorship-related consumer behaviour; in this case, switching intentions and perceived switching cost. Two points are noteworthy here: First, additional research could include a more detailed operationalisation of the football involvement construct in order to understand the impact of different levels of involvement to fans' switching intentions and perceived switching cost. Second, further research is strongly encouraged to explore the effect of other factors that may intervene in fully understanding the switching intentions and overall behaviour in the telecommunication industry, including the key characteristics of the supplier-customer relationship (i.e., length, depth and breadth of this relationship) (Bolton, Lemon, & Verhoef, 2004; Lopez, Redondo, & Olivan 2006). These variables can be used to enhance the homogeneity of the samples of customers and thus to enable the identification of any potential effects on overall switching behaviour due to the sponsorship. Research in broad marketing and sponsorship literature has devoted considerable effort to explore consumers'

loyalty but less so to the factors (and the extent thereof) explaining switching behaviour. As such, we believe that this is an interesting avenue for research as it links sponsorship to switching behaviour.

Third, taking into account that sponsorship success follows a team's on-field success (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2004) and that the football team used in this study is very successful in the Greek market, it would be worthwhile to assess the fan-team-sponsor link for less successful teams in order to understand more thoroughly how sponsorship works in the minds of sport fans. Fourth, further research may also explore the impact of activation on maximising the high-level of sponsorship on perceived switching cost and customers' intention to switch. To date, there is evidence in the sponsorship literature showing that dynamic activation generates more favourable attitudinal evolution of the sponsor brand (Weeks, Cronwell, & Drennan 2008) and other favourable outcomes (Sneath, Finney, & Close. 2005) especially when it is linked with high-fit sponsorship. Thus, it is plausible that extensive promotion of the relationship with targeted activation activities may increase the sponsorship value not only in terms of buying behaviour in general, but also with regards to customer's intentions to switch from other providers to the sponsor in particular. Also, future research may investigate whether switching intention is positively or negatively affected in settings of pretender sponsorship practices familiar as ambush marketing.

With regard to consumer switching intentions, other factors besides those suggested in this study can influence customer loyalty and hence prevent customer migration to competitors. Developing fan profiles can assist sponsors to tailor their marketing efforts to be more effective in reaching different customer segments. For instance, previous research has demonstrated that demographic (Alexandris et al., 2008; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), geographic, and socio-cultural characteristics (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Tsotsou & Alexandris, 2009) can influence

sponsorship effectiveness. Therefore, future studies could employ additional research methodologies, such as interviews at the stadium, to increase representativeness of the fans and investigate consumer intentions (and overall behaviour) in different target groups.

In conclusion, the present study adds to the theoretical understanding of linking sport sponsorship to service-switching behaviour, while at the same time offering managerial implications by which sponsors can seek to improve the results of future sponsorship-planning decisions.

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